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# Hokusai, the “Old Man Mad about Drawing.”



Far as the older phases of the art of the color print in Japan are concerned, the recent exhibition of color prints held by the Japan Society in the Fifth Avenue Building was commendably comprehensive and adequate. It was arranged so as to be illustrative of the development of the art from Moronobu (1638-1695) to the middle of the nineteenth century. Few of us, perhaps, realize that Hokusai died as late as 1849, and that Hiroshige lived until 1858. The former was in his ninetieth year. No real color prints having been executed in Japan prior to 1742 and none with more than two color blocks prior to 1764, the span of Hokusai's life may be said to coincide with that of the art itself, from its beginnings to its climax in his own work.

A fault in the exhibition was the manner in which the prints were framed. The mats around them were so large that each print became a little oasis of color in a desert of white.

THE LOTUS Japanese prints should not be mounted like the black and white prints of the Western world. The plate surface of the Western print shows the better for a white mat. But the only way to frame a Japanese color print is in a narrow black frame—a mere strip of wood—with a black or very dark grey mat, not more than two inches wide. This method serves to bring out the colors most beautifully.

It seems also, from the scant showing of Hokusai prints, that the Japan Society shares, with the Japanese, the opinion that Europe and America over-rate this artist. But the attitude of the Japanese connoisseur toward the color print in general has been aloofness. As an art it is not old enough to appeal to him, and it deals too often with the common things of life to agree with his idea of artistic dignity. That the color print should be seriously accepted as an important adjunct of Japanese art expression is to him incomprehensible, while the rank assigned by us to Hokusai as the greatest master among the artists of Japan, must, to the Japanese art lover, seem an absurdity. But one cannot look through a set of Whistler etchings without noting Hokusai's influence upon him; and this ar-

tist's influence on Western art during the last quarter of a century has been strong and obvious. Whistler especially, and the French, owe much to it. Our escape from the mid-Victorian picture with a story to the refuge afforded by the picture that is a decoration, largely is due to it. Recall that Whistler etching of a bridge, which were it not a Whistler might be a Hokusai and indeed might never have been executed, but for Hokusai's color print of the bridge at Okazaki, one of his three most famous prints, the two others being the "big wave"—through the curving crest of which Fuji is seen in the distance—and the water fall of Goro.



OF these three the "big wave"—"Fugi san seen beneath a wave of the sea at Canazawa"—was loaned to the exhibition by Mr. Hamilton Easter Field. It is a fine impression, there being plenty of light brown or ochre in the coloring of the boats, a point that largely determines the quality of an impression of the "big wave." One misses the bridge and the waterfall. Though familiar through reproductions, they would have been most wel-

THE LOTUS come in the original. The bridge is the perfection of the grace of the curving line and the weight, power and swiftness of a volume of water falling from a height is so completely conveyed in the Goro print, that a fine impression of it in the exhibition would have evoked the liveliest admiration for this print in particular and for the Japanese color print in general.

There was, however, one print among the paltry seven representing Hokusai in the show, which illustrated admirably that artist's skill in expressing graceful motion;—and of all living creatures he selected turtles for his purpose. The turtles are shown swimming under water. The heavy bodies are buoyed by the element in which they are disporting.—One notes the free, yet neither precipitous nor cutting motion of the soft flippers that propel them without much stirring of the water. In this print the artist has achieved the impossible—a turtle picture that is fascinating. It was loaned by the estate of the late Francis Lathrop.



HOKUSAI sold his prints at beggarly prices among the poorer classes of Japan, sometimes a batch of them, for no more than the

handful of rice he required for sustenance. They were bought for ephemeral amusement and thrown away. The populace little suspected that it was being entertained by master-pieces. It is Western appreciation that gradually has put a price on every Hokusai print obtainable. This master was itinerant, little better than vagrant. He and his daughter, Oyei, also an artist and with a reputation for fortune telling, would hire a cheap house which they never attempted to clean, work in it until it became intolerably filthy even for them, then move into another. The Japanese connoisseur with little regard for the print as a work of art, would have even less for it from the hands of an old vagrant. Yet this itinerant maker of wood block color-prints was to become to the Western world the most characteristic and famous of Japanese artists, and the prints, which his contemporaries glanced at and threw away, were destined to have a strong and lasting influence upon Western art.

Hokusai's tomb, black and neglected, stands in the Asakusa suburb, among the pines and cherry trees of a monastery garden ; unless Western appreciation has



THE led to its being restored. It is inscribed, LOTUS "Tomb of Gwakio Rojin Munji," which means "the old man mad about drawing," a description he applied to himself. There is also on the tomb a poem which, according to Japanese custom, he composed during his last hours:—"My soul turned will-o'-the-wisp, can come and go at ease over the summer fields"—as during life his fancy did in his color prints, of which there were far too few in the exhibition of the Japan Society.

